GUIDE TO THE MD4 RWALA FILE

[The Rwala (also called the Ăl Ğiflı) are an Arab Bedouin tribe of true nomadic camel-breeders. They nomadize over a vast area ranging between 28 to 34 degrees north latitude and 36 to 42 degrees east longitude, thus cross-cutting four national boundaries - Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria (cf. 2: Musil, p. 676). Their principal grazing grounds are in the Syrian Desert along an axis running southeastward from Damascus into northwestern Arabia. During the dry months of July and August they camp in the neighborhood of Damascus; the remainder of the year they go into the interior of the desert (cf. 1: Raswan, p. 5, and 2: Musil, p. 666).

There seems to be very little information available concerning Rwala demography. In a rather casual statement, 1: Raswan (p. 4) places their total population at 35,000 - with 7,000 tents and over 300,000 camels.

According to Musil, the Rwala divide the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula into two major categories: the hazar, or those who dwell in permanent houses, and the 'arab, those who dwell in movable tents. "Arab, therefore, is the name given throughout the desert to the inhabitant of a black tent only." But not all Arabs are Bedouins. The Rwala further distinguish two categories of Arabs, the šwāja and the Bedouins. The šwāja have black tents of goat's hair and flocks of black goats and sheep. These flocks do not permit them to nomadize in the interior of the desert; they are limited to the territory where there is an abundance of water and annual fodder plants. The Bedouins, on the other hand, are Arabs who breed camels exclusively or primarily, and who dwell in the interior of the desert (jesarrezun) for ten months of the year. Musil notes that the Rwala are recognized by all tribes as being true and pure Bedouins. Moreover, they are "warriors on horseback, for they are able both to wield the spear and to manage horses" (2: Musil, pp. 44-45).

Among the Bedouins, the Rwala belong to a large group of tribes called 'Aneze, which is divided into a southern and a northern branch. The northern 'Aneze are further subdivided into two branches, the Zana Muslim and the Zana Bisr. The Rwala are included in the Zana Muslim branch along with the Weld 'Ali, while the Zana Bisr includes the Sba'a, the Fed'an, and the 'Amarat. In Rwala ideology, all of the component groups of the 'Aneze are patrilineally descended from a common paternal ancestor, and are thus all their "paternal cousins" (beni al-'amm) (2: Musil, p. 46).

In summary, the social world of the Rwala may be conceptualized as a series of concentric social categories delineating progressively broader units of identification, starting with local groups within their own tribe and ranging outward to encompass all of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula.

The literature on the Rwala is relatively sparse, and the MD4 Rwala file presently consists of only two sources, both in English. The major source is 2: Musil, by a Czech geographer. This source approximates a general ethnography in its coverage, although there is a special emphasis on folk lore and literature. The other source is 1: Raswan, by a traveler who lived with the Bedouins for many years. Raswan's book presents a popular treatment of many aspects of Rwala culture, with particular attention to ethics and the code of honor, hospitality, migration, raids, courtship and marriage, and personality types.

It should be stressed that these are the two basic sources from which most other writers on the Rwala have derived their information.

Unfortunately, it cannot be determined with any precision how much time either Musil or Raswan spent among the Rwala, although it is very likely that their periods of field observations overlapped. Musil simply mentions "traveling and camping with them for months" (p. xiii), but he does not give any field dates. What we do know for sure is that his field work must have occurred prior to 1928, the date of publication of his monograph. Raswan, on the other hand, does note field dates, but in a rather ambiguous

manner. Thus he says he "spent three years among the Arabs" (p. 12), evidently from 1911 to 1914, and subsequently returned for various periods of time on numerous occasions during the years from 1926 to 1935. Much of this time seems to have been spent with the Rwala, but he did live among other Bedouin groups as well.

On the whole, the data in this file lack depth except on a few topics such as literature, but they do provide a fairly good general account of the basic patterns of Rwala culture and society. Moreover, this account is especially valuable for its portrayal of a fully functioning, traditional Bedouin group.

It should be noted, finally, that it may be difficult for the non-specialist to extract a systematic picture of Rwala social structure from these data, and it may be advisable to read beforehand a modern summary of Bedouin social organization such as the one presented in George A. Lipsky et al, Saudi Arabia, New Haven, HRAF Press, 1959: especially pp. 72-78.]

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